

CHAPTER 1



Inseparable Strands: The Intertwining of Oral and Printed Yarns

"I swallowed it jest as he gin it to me!" shouted the Sucker.

—*"Swallowing an Oyster Alive, a Story of Illinois
— by a Missourian"*

Near the Peaks of Otter on Virginia's Blue Ridge, the Baptist church operates a boys' summer camp that covers 510 acres of woodland surrounded by national forest and national park lands. One Monday afternoon in midsummer, as a new group of campers arrived for their week's stay, a nervous mother spoke to the camp director about conditions at the camp. "Do y'all have much trouble with snakes up here?" she asked. "No ma'am, we really don't," the camp director replied soberly. "The mountain lions eat 'em." Once started, the director piled one stretcher on top of another for the joint benefit of this gullible lady and an appreciative forest ranger who listened with a solemn face but a gleam of recognition and delight in his eye.¹

Don Lewis, the camp director, is no backwoods, tobacco-chewing old-timer. Thirty-some years old, raised in a suburb of Washington, D.C., college and seminary educated, he is, nonetheless, a contemporary tall tale artist who tells his stories to friends and strangers, visiting parents and young campers, colleagues and casual acquaintances. His tales, and his attitude toward them, derive from an oral storytelling tradition that does not discriminate against the twentieth century, education, or the suburbs. As Don Lewis tells it, the tall tale is a comic